

Submission from the **Barcoo Shire Council** to the Queensland Parliament's Agriculture and Environment Committee inquiry into the impacts of invasive plants (weeds), and their control.

## Introduction

While the Barcoo Shire is relatively free of Prickly Acacia, it has a vested interest in the successful control and eradication of this Weed of National Significance for a number of critical reasons:

1. water and livestock movement are the major vectors for seed dispersal (Gutteridge and Shelton 2005) and, therefore, the spread of infestations to clean country;
2. the Shire is situated downstream of the high infestation areas of the Mitchell Grass Downs;
3. the Barcoo Shire is home to the Channel Country, arguably the finest natural cattle fattening country in the world and the generator of much of western Queensland's grazing wealth;
4. there are currently no protocols in place to ensure cattle brought into the Channel Country from Prickly Acacia infested northern breeder blocks are not carrying ingested seeds; and
5. the lower Channel Country of the Barcoo Shire is the gateway to the RAMSAR listed Coongie Lakes of northeastern South Australia.

In short, Prickly Acacia poses a high and unacceptable risk to the globally recognised economy and ecology of the Channel Country.

It should be noted that Diamantina and Bulloo shires face similar risks to Barcoo Shire, while the unincorporated areas of northeastern South Australia, where the Coongie Lakes are situated, has no local government representation.

### ***1. The responsibilities of local governments in relation to the control of prohibited, restricted and invasive plants imposed under s.48 of the Biosecurity Act 2014 are reasonable, and local governments are meeting those obligations.***

The responsibilities as listed in the Act are reasonable, but only if local governments are adequately resourced, and receive the necessary support from government agencies.

The withdrawal of Rural Lands Inspectors has placed more pressure on shire rural lands officers who reside in the community and are often reluctant to take action. In addition, conflicts of interest arise where an elected representative views Prickly Acacia as a fodder asset, and may be harbouring declared plants on their property.

A solution to non-compliance and conflicts of interest would be for shire rural lands officers to report such instances to a Biosecurity Queensland officer with the independence and authority to take action.

The failure by local government to enforce landholder compliance with declared plant control obligations has been a contributing factor to the three-fold increase (7 to 22 million hectares) in Prickly Acacia infestations between 1996 and 2016 (DSITI 2015, DCQ 2015, Pest Central 2015).

Also contributing to this spread has been the absence of Biosecurity Queensland control over movement of stock from infested to clean areas - given that seeds can take up to a week to pass through cattle and that 41% remain viable (Barker 1996), stock movement has been a prime vector for Prickly Acacia spread (Gutteridge and Shelton 2005). Without protocols, and enforcement, viable seeds will continue to be defecated in viable habitat, potentially, thousands of kilometres from their source.

Prickly Acacia has affected rural land values (DCQ 2016), which will continue to decline as infestations increase, hence local government rates will need to rise to meet the shortfall.

***2. Programs for the control of weeds on Crown land administered by the Department of Natural Resources and Mines are effective.***

No comment.

***3. Biosecurity Queensland's weeds programs, including biological controls and new technologies, are adequately funded and effective at controlling weeds.***

While there has been an impressive degree of success in this field with other species (Parkinsonia, Cactus, Parthenium, Mother of Millions, Bellyache Bush, Cat's Claw Creeper, Lantana and Giant Rat's Tail Grass), such success has not, as yet, been forthcoming for Prickly Acacia, due to host specificity problems. A gall thrip is currently under host specificity tests at the BQ Invasive Plant and Animal Science unit in Brisbane.

While BQ is doing excellent work in the biocontrol field, increased resources are needed to find a this host specific, effective control agent for Prickly Acacia that is so desperately needed

***4. Environmental programs administered by the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection impact favourably on weed control programs administered by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and local governments.***

No comment

**5. Federal, state and local government weeds programs are coordinated to maximise their achievements and to have a whole of government approach.**

This is likely to remain a pipe dream for the following reasons:

1. landholders not controlling declared plants especially Weeds of National Significance
2. reluctance of local government to issue compliance notices and enforce the Act (Biosecurity Act 2014)
3. Federal and State funding are short-term cycles that often change focus, and can have divergent priorities
4. the potential discrepancy between departments (Agriculture promoting leucaena while Environment and Lands warning of weed potential, and Whitsunday Shire declaring it a weed)

**General comments**

The reluctance of local governments to enforce the Act (e.g. landholders not controlling Prickly Acacia) has resulted in a loss of production and environmental degradation of millions of hectares across Western Queensland.

Studies have shown that a 25% canopy cover of Prickly Acacia suppresses pasture growth by 50% (Gutteridge and Shelton 2005) and, given that 95% of the highly productive Mitchell Grass Downs will be affected by Prickly Acacia by 2030 should the current spread continue (DCQ 2016), the implications for producers and local governments are dire.

An independent study into the economic cost of Prickly Acacia is urgently required as 2016 figures from DCQ put annual production losses at \$24 million and control costs at \$9 million. However, calculations by PRW Agribusiness in 2017 indicate the cost of lost production could be as high as \$203 million per year. This uses the following assumptions based on FutureBeef's Stocktake 2014: an Adult Equivalent for unaffected land is 10 hectares, while for land with high density Prickly Acacia an Adult Equivalent is 50 hectares.

As well as productivity losses, Prickly Acacia causes loss of biodiversity through ground cover reduction, erosion and increased sediment runoff, as well as providing a refuge for declared pest animals.

The replacement of sheep with cattle across much of the Mitchell Grass Downs has exacerbated the spread of Prickly Acacia. Only 2% of seeds ingested by sheep pass through the animal, while with cattle it is 81%; as this can take up to six days, travelling stock pose an unacceptable risk to clean country over vast distances.

The Barcoo Shire Council is gravely concerned about the spread of Prickly Acacia into the Channel Country. This prime natural fattening country sources much of its stock from breeding areas straddling the high Prickly Acacia infestations of the northern Mitchell Grass Downs. Without appropriate livestock transport protocols in place this weed will continue to spread far and wide.

It is worth mentioning the important role that the local NRM body, Desert Channels Queensland plays in the control of Prickly Acacia. Not only has it been at the forefront of developing new and very effective control techniques, it has long been a collaborator with local government, supporting the Shire Rural Lands Officers Group and the Central West Regional Pest Management Group.

With all due respect to those concerned, the control strategies supporting the so called 'containment line' have seen the area affect increase from 6 million hectares to 22 million hectares; therefore, our approach to this weed needs to be revised. With the success displayed by Desert Channels Queensland over the past three years, it would seem they have developed a template for eradication that is worth duplicating on a broad scale.

Given the serious threat posed to the Channel Country's production and environmental values by Prickly Acacia, this issue should be a more prominent focus of the Lake Eyre Basin Intergovernmental Agreement.

### Sources

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